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ABSTRACT

Working out assessment philosophy and practices takes time, as the team members working on the "Competent Children" research project in New Zealand have found out during the first 18 months of the project. It is imperative that those with expertise in early childhood care and education insist on developmentally appropriate assessment practice and know why they are arguing for such practices. The "Competent Children" project's goal is to find out more about the influences of early childhood experiences on children's competencies as they enter school. The two strands of influences are family background and early childhood care and education. Attempts to align the project with the aims and goals of the National Curriculum have been made. Rather than focusing on only one or two competencies, the Competent Children project will study numerous competencies (including early literacy, logical reasoning, communication skills, and social problem-solving) and end up with numerous sets of results because no one instrument to measure holistic learning holistically has been developed. It is not possible to offer high quality early childhood care and education without assessment; but, though difficult, assessment guidelines need to be worked on by early childhood educators. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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FROM CURRICULUM TO COMPETENT CHILDREN:

THE DECADE OF QUALITY?

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Quality - the dream and the concern

In conversations with people involved with early childhood in the last few years, the topic which dominates is quality. I applaud that focus and I commend CECUA for holding a conference on the "Early Childhood National Curriculum" because it allows those present to concentrate their thinking and discussion on the curriculum and quality programmes. Quality programmes have a direct impact on children's well-being and learning in early childhood services.

On other occasions, I have referred to the distinction between quality assurance and quality practice made by Irene Balaquer and Helen Penn (1990) in their work for the European Community. These women note that quality assurance occurs mostly as a consequence of Government policies, provisions and control; eg, **policies** related to training and qualifications, funding, charters, regulations and codes of practice, and monitoring of standards; **provisions** such as funding, training, and advisory support; and **controls** such as the regulations themselves and their monitoring, undertaken in the New Zealand context by the Education Review Office. Policies, provisions and controls have a significant influence on early childhood teachers, and the way the curriculum is put into practice. That is, quality programmes occur within supportive policies, provisions and control of the State.

I had a dream that by about 1993 the policy assurance changes would be in place, funding would be improved and everyone would be able to concentrate on making quality programmes a reality. That dream is getting blurred. The policies relating to training and qualifications are very confusing, the staged plan for funding was halted, and the whole funding policy is being reviewed, with hints that the balance between bulk funding and fees subsidies may shift. Provisions such as training and advisory support are being fragmented. The approach taken to monitoring standards has become explicitly control-focused.

The positive change on the horizon is the curriculum. I too have a dream about how that will make a significant difference for the mokopuna. I applaud the use of the term 'developmentally-

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appropriateness' in relation to the curriculum. Like Margaret Carr, I wish the cover page also talked about 'cultural appropriateness." Why do we need to emphasize appropriateness? Because the corollary of introducing a curriculum is likely to be some form of assessment of how the curriculum goals are being met. If the national curriculum guidelines for early childhood services are incorporated into charter guidelines as was indicated in the 1990 DOPs (Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices), then the Education Review Office will be bound to assess the outcomes. The question is likely to be, 'What can you show which indicates you have made a difference for these children?' The pressure will be on to measure children's progress.

It will be imperative that those with expertise in early childhood care and education insist on developmentally-appropriate assessment practice and be able to know-why (Meade, 1991) they are arguing for such practices.

A dilemma

I have a dilemma, for which there is no easy answer. Would I prefer to see the curriculum guidelines outside of the control environment, that is, not incorporated in charter requirements, even though it may mean less likelihood of resources for curriculum implementation? Or, would I prefer to see them incorporated as mandatory objectives in charters, because there will be universal implementation of the principles and practices? My dilemma is actually your dilemma! Please think about it, and get into some political action. I doubt that any decision about the status of the curriculum in relation to charters is likely until the final guidelines are published, a year or more from now, so you have time to discuss this issue.

At the present time, I believe they would be better kept outside of charter requirements. I have three reasons for saying this. First, the control rather than developmental orientation which prevails is likely to distort how you feel about and use of the curriculum guidelines. Second, I am aware from NZCER's experience with Progressive Achievement Tests that ERO's requests for data on children's progress have had an unintended consequence: schools and managers are using test instruments in inappropriate ways, to test children to show off their scores rather than as formative evaluative tools. Third, it will take considerable time and discussion to work out developmentally-appropriate practices for assessing the benefits of programmes for children which are appropriate for children in New Zealand and which do not adversely affect the different cultural blueprints found in Te Kohanga Reo and ao'ga amata, for example (Meade, 1991). Working out assessment philosophy and practices takes a lot of time, as the team members working on the Competent Children research project have found out in the last 18 months.

It is some of these latter experiences that I want to share with you today. I think the developing story of devising the research instruments for assessing children's competencies will illustrate some of the reasons why I am urging caution about government policies to do with the assessment of young children.

There has been a connection between the Competent Children project and

Te Whaariki in their respective gestation phases. We have felt nourished by the wonderful team who developed Te Whaariki. We were able to connect by my being one of the advisers to Helen May and Margaret Carr when they were working on Te Whaariki, and Helen May being a member of the advisory committee for the Competent Children project.

The Competent Children project

The Competent Children project began formally in early 1992. The goal is to find out more about the influences of early childhood experiences on children's competencies. The two strands of influences are family background and early childhood care and education. Initially, in defining competency, the research team focused on the following skills: the capacity to persist, to be self-initiating, to be socially competent, to have positive language skills and to be learning orientated in approaching adults.

As the project developed, and as Te Whaariki developed, we attempted to align the project with the aims and goals of the 1992 draft of the National Curriculum (Carr and May, 1992) with a view to seeing if there would be a relationship between early childhood experiences and child outcomes.

We have persisted with this approach to some extent even though the delay in the release of the National Curriculum Guidelines has meant that it is harder to link the project to the implementation of Te Whaariki. Some of our researchers have been working in centres since Term 2, and we started on a larger scale in over 20 early childhood services (including family day care schemes, last week. And from this weekend forward, early childhood teachers and supervisors are beginning to transform the formal aims, goals and objectives in the guidelines into their curriculum. The timing for the research is out of synchrony.

However, all is not lost. Our principal objective was not to evaluate Te Whaariki; rather it was to establish the relative influences of family variables and early childhood care and education in the short-term (by age 5 and age 6) and over a very long period of time. We are being very ambitious and plan to stay in contact with these children until the next millennium; that is, until they leave secondary school.

As well, Te Whaariki was developed using an extensive consultative process which captured and wove in the aims, goals and principles practised in early childhood centres in Aotearoa, New Zealand in the 1990s. Thus, the research project should be able to pick up the connections between the informal prevailing curricula and the effects on children.

Our research question is:

What difference do the variables of:
(a) family background,
(b) costs, availability, quality features of services, and
(c) family interaction or involvement with ECS

make with regard to:

(d) outcomes for child competencies and for progress in the junior school years,
(e) choice of primary school, and plans for later schooling,
(f) benefits for parents, whanau?

We did a small pilot study last year with 6 early childhood services participating and 19 children and their families allowing us to try out our design and our data collection on them. The report from this small study is now available from NZCER, called Competent Children Pilot Study Report (1993). A selection of results is presented; they are based on the overall data in order to protect the confidentiality of the small number of centres and families.

We have not given any results about the outcomes for children's competencies. That would not be proper, given the small number of children in the pilot study. Also, we came to realise that we needed to devote far more time, effort and expertise to the assessment of competencies instruments before we began on the main longitudinal study.

Why?

First, we had had difficulties from the early days in taking Te Whaariki and drawing out the objectives for children. The Guidelines contain principles, aims and goals which are not expressed in terms of outcomes for children; rather they describe what could be happening in an on-going, day-to-day way. As well, although the draft says the goals are for children - for example, one goal is "children's health is promoted," - no measurable objective and standard is stated; rather, the adults' desirable practices are described. It is over to you when you complete your whaariki for your centre to define more specific objectives.

Nevertheless, the Competent Children team used the curriculum goals as the framework for asking significant adults in the pilot study children's lives to describe some of the competencies of the children, and we have continued to do so with considerable technical refinement in the final interview schedule. We have collapsed two of the goals into one: 'belonging' and 'contribution' proved too hard to find separate research measures. We decided to put these goals under the outcome heading of 'social-emotional competency.' Thus, the competencies we are now studying via the interviews with the staff are:

.	social-emotional	- self-care/independence, - relationships with peers, - relationships with adults;
.	communication	- receptive language, - expressive language;
.	exploration	- inquisitiveness, - perseverance.

Each goal or, rather, the associated competency has 9 to 10 items associated with it in order to get a rounded picture of that particular competency for each child. We ask both staff and parents to tell us about the children which helps us gain a picture of their well-being, but no attempt is made to rate the outcome of that goal. It would not be right and proper to measure something like 'mana wairua.'

We chose to approach these competencies by interviewing a significant adult in the children's lives and them about these competencies, because none of these competencies can be assessed at one point in time by a relative stranger. Their appraisal needs many observations in different circumstances over a period of time. Teachers and supervisors do this sort of observation all the time.

It is important to note that these goals are about a child's 'being', not about what a child can 'do.' I believe that it is a strength of early childhood care and education that we concentrate on the child's 'being', her mana. If you have ever puzzled over the title to the report, Education to Be More, that was what I was on about - the child's be-ing or, more specifically, her be-ing more.

Assessing the children based on these goals is philosophically difficult. As well, using interviews and rating scales is not without its technical difficulties. You have probably already mentally noted some of them. Are the questions culturally inclusive? How can we compare the ratings of different adults who have never sat together and worked out a shared definition of, say, curiosity? Can staff tell an interviewer about all these facets of the children; won't the parents know more about some competencies?

We have grappled with these questions on many occasions, and have tried out numerous versions of the questions. Our trials, the pilot study and our work with research assistants from different ethnic backgrounds have resulted in a schedule which we all agree is not perfect but is the best we can do. One finding from the pilot study which was reassuring was that the questions seemed to be valid items because the parents and staff ratings had high correlations. We have some on-going checks on the validity of some items, in that the researchers observe the children over three hours on three separate occasions and we do get a reasonable picture of the children as explorers and communicators, and about their social relationships with peers and adults.

Another set of competencies are assessed by way of an interview with the children about one month before they start school (and after we have been observing the children).
Five competencies are assessed by this method:

- social problem-solving,
- early literacy,
- early mathematics,
- logical reasoning,
- motor skills.

The researcher spends about 30 - 40 minutes conducting these interviews with each child.

Some of these competencies overlap with or are part of the curriculum goal of 'communication' and 'belonging'. As researchers, we will need to treat them separately because they are assessed and scored in a different way from the adults' interview about their perceptions of the children's competencies. That is, there are technical limitations on researchers being able to assess children holistically, whereas early childhood practitioners can and do build more holistic pictures of children.

Before starting on the main study the team, supplemented by an assessment adviser from NZCER, has been working on refining these research tools to find out whether the items get results which truly portray the child (in technical terms, item validity) and to find out whether the items produce consistent results (in technical terms, item and instrument reliability). All this has taken hours of working with children to test, re-test and cross-check with their teachers. We want to know if there are gender or cultural biases in the assessment instruments which should be eliminated, for example. We want to know that they will detect differences in competencies between children, which is necessary when we are trying to show that high quality early childhood care and education makes a difference.

This is the sort of time-investment which researchers are expected to make before they launch into assessment. In many overseas studies, the researchers have simply used standardised tests, or off-the-shelf instruments. From early days, we rejected taking this route. There were three main reasons. First, the guidelines on developmentally-appropriate assessment produced by experts in the USA (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991) are quite unequivocal in their opposition of standardised tests for this age group, and we did not want to appear to endorse their use in New Zealand by incorporating them into such a significant research project as the Competent Children project. Second, the instruments which do exist have not been evaluated for the New Zealand context, in particular for Maori and different Pacific Island cultures. They will not tap into their cultural blueprints. Third, most of the instruments which are used for this age group are designed to identify the 5 or 10% of children who have some form of developmental delay. As researchers, we needed to develop some ways of assessing the full range of abilities and achievements of children at the point when they are leaving early childhood services and starting school, **and** which can be used again after a year in school to note any changes, and later on in their schooling. This repetition of assessment is necessary in longitudinal studies and is the reason why we have included 'early literacy' and 'early mathematics' in the competencies in the study.

I want to describe one last competency that we are trying to capture

via our observations of the children. It is called by Tina Bruce (1991) and others, 'free-flow play.' This term is difficult to say at the best of times, and harder when standing in front of so many people, so I will abbreviate it to FFP (not to be confused with FPP!). On our child observation schedule, we call it 'complex pretend play.'

Tina Bruce lists twelve features of FFP and I don't have time to describe them all to you. The concluding feature is that FFP is "an integrating mechanism which brings together everything we learn, know, feel and understand," (op.cit., p.60). Until I read Tina Bruce's book, I saw FFP only as a process; now I see it as both a process and a competency. You are experienced early childhood educators and will be able to visualise some wonderful, magical occasions when this happens for children. Am I right about it being both?

I would like to quote Bruce further because it set the scene for my concluding comments on possible policies on assessment. She says,

> "Free-flow play is about the way we apply and use what we have experienced and know as it becomes integrated and whole. It is the way children make sense of their learning education. It shows us the learning that has occurred, and how it is taken up, dealt with and developed by the child. Through free-flow play, children can control over their lives, and over their knowledge and understanding, and feelings and relationships with others ... [Some theories about play] have a cognitive emphasis (eg, Bruner, Tizard) and stress the products or outcomes of play, as it prepares children for future life.
>
> "Other theories emphasize free-flow play as an integrating mechanism [eg, Piaget, Vygotsky, Athey], and suggest that FFP is unique in its contribution to development. Through emphasising its **process** [my emphasis], outcomes are also, in the long term, enriched," (pp.78-79).

You will have noted that, for the most part, the Competent Children researchers will be concentrating on the products or outcomes of children's play in our attempt to examine the influences of early childhood care and education, and of family background. In addition, however, we are noting which children engage in FFP and in what contexts.

You will have also noted, I hope, that we are examining children's competencies - plural. We do not subscribe to the view that young children are competent or not. Like adults, young children have strengths and weaknesses in different areas of their development. We have selected a range of competencies to study, many of them derived explicitly from the draft Curriculum Guidelines, some from other research literature.

This recognition of a plurality of competencies is both a plus and a minus. A strength of studying and talking about a range of competencies is that it should decrease the tendency for adults to talk about infants and young children in terms of one yardstick - ' 'a good child' or 'a bright child.' Those of us who are interested in human development don't discuss adults in that way, so why do so

in relation to young children? A danger in the research team exploring a range of competencies is that naive people may come to think that it is possible, or desirable (heaven forbid) to divide learning for young children into subjects. If you work with young children, you know that cannot be done and should not be done. This is why the metaphor of a whaariki is brilliant - you can see that a mat cannot be woven from a single vertical or horizontal stand, nor will it stay woven together if one strand were separated from the mat.

In summary, then, it is necessary for technical reasons for researchers to select some facets of children's development in order to measure what is happening for them. Many projects pick on only one or two measures. We have decided to study ten competencies, and we will end up with ten sets of results, because no-one has developed research instruments which measure holistic learning holistically. Early childhood teachers and supervisors are not bound by such strict conventions. You can develop ways to assess and record what children gain from your curriculum in your centre which are more holistic, because you will have a somewhat different orientation, although both of practitioners and researchers share an interest in finding out what works for children.

Assessment and early childhood care and education

The Competent Children team hope that our project, inter alia, will enrich our collective understanding of curricula as they are used to ensure the best possible care and education for our children.

Assessment has been avoided by most people in the early childhood sector. I am sad about this. I do not believe that it is possible to plan and run a quality programme without assessment. Having said that, I should hasten to add my voice to those who advocate that assessment in early childhood services should be focused on the programmes and how they benefit children.

NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (1991), in the only set of assessment guidelines I have seen devised specifically for early childhood services, state that the purposes for which assessment procedures are used in early childhood care and education should be limited to:

(a) educational planning and communicating with parents,
(b) identifying children with special educational needs, and
(c) curriculum evaluation and accountability.

There is a glaring gap in the charter guidelines which Anne Smith noted in 1989 in the 'Purple Handbook' and I note is still barely visible in the 1990 revision of the charter guidelines - early childhood services are not asked to formulate plans for appraising their curriculum. This suggests to me that early childhood people are not in the habit of thinking about the curriculum spiral of plan, implement and evaluate.

I hope that the processes you use to develop your own whaariki will result in a better balance between planning and reviewing (evaluating) your curriculum. Mary Jane Drummond (1990) reminds us that "planning

is always about what we would like to happen" and "review is a more demanding process, more concentrated, more closely connected to reality:"

Plan	Review/assess
Good intentions	What actually happened
Wishful thinking	Factual descriptions
Theories	Evidence
Hope for the best	Real understanding

I do not believe that it is possible to offer high quality early childhood care and education without assessment. Having said that, I should emphasize that I am talking about the assessment of programmes and what early educators do for children "in the present and for the future," (Meade, 1988). Think about it ... how will (do) you know, and feel secure that your curriculum will benefit the children you work with in the present and for the future? If you are getting closer to helping all children achieve competency in the sort of free-flow play which 'brings together everything [they have] learned, know, feel and understand,' how will you know?
These are hard questions, but they need to be answered.

I think there is a gap in our practices in early childhood services. There is certainly a gap in the charter guidelines. But, I have now come back full-circle to the dilemma I posed in the early part of this talk. If assessment is included more explicitly in charters, would the government then want to formulate standardised guidelines for assessment in early childhood services? Would they turn out to be as developmentally- and culturally-appropriate as Te Whaariki?

You are the best people to work out developmentally-appropriate assessment practices. It won't be easy, as I have tried to illustrate by describing some of the issues in using assessment in the Competent Children research project. Nevertheless, assessment guidelines need to be worked on, and by early childhood people.

I can think of nothing which would stifle free-flow play faster than if policy makers introduced standardised testing of young children - either in early childhood services or at school entry. Such a policy would probably spell the end of children playing for hours on end with their peers in early childhood centres - and thereby integrating their learning and engaging in what Froebel described as their highest form of functioning.

Kia ora, hui hui mai tatou.

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